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STILL MISSING

A Novel

CHEVY STEVENS

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St. Martin's Press  New York

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For my mother, who gave me an imagination

SESSION ONE

You know, Doc, you're not the first shrink I've seen since I got back. The one my family doctor recommended right after I came home was a real prize. The guy actually tried to act like he didn't know who I was, but that was a pile of crap—you'd have to be deaf and blind not to. Hell, it seems like every time I turn around another asshole with a camera is jumping out of the bushes. But before all this shit went down? Most of the world had never heard of Vancouver Island, let alone Clayton Falls. Now mention the island to someone and I'm willing to bet the first thing out of their mouth will be, "Isn't that where that lady Realtor was abducted?"

Even the guy's office was a turnoff—black leather couches, plastic plants, glass and chrome desk. Way to make your patients feel comfortable, buddy. And of course everything was perfectly lined up on the desk. His teeth were the only damn thing crooked in his office, and if you ask me, there's

something a little strange about a guy who needs to line up everything on his desk but doesn't get his teeth fixed.

Right away he asked me about my mom, and then he actually tried to make me draw the color of my feelings with crayons and a sketch pad. When I said he must be kidding, he told me I was resisting my feelings and needed to "embrace the process." Well, screw him and his process. I only lasted two sessions. Spent most of the time wondering if I should kill him or myself.

So it's taken me until December—four months since I got home—to even try this therapy stuff again. I'd almost resigned myself to just staying screwed up, but the idea of living the rest of my life feeling this way . . . Your writing on your Web site was sort of funny, for a shrink, and you looked kind—nice teeth, by the way. Even better, you don't have a bunch of letters that mean God only knows what after your name. I don't want the biggest and the best. That just means a bigger ego and an even bigger bill. I don't even mind driving an hour and a half to get here. Gets me out of Clayton Falls, and so far I haven't found any reporters hiding in my backseat.

But don't get me wrong, just because you look like someone's grandmother—you should be knitting, not taking notes—doesn't mean I like being here. And telling me to call you Nadine? Not sure what that's all about, but let me guess. I have your first name, so now I'm supposed to feel like we're buddies and it's okay for me to tell you stuff I don't want to remember, let alone talk about? Sorry, I'm not paying you to be my friend, so if it's all the same to you I'll just stick with Doc.

And while we're getting shit straight here, let's lay down some ground rules before we start this joyride. If we're going

to do this, it's going to be done my way. That means no questions from you. Not even one sneaky little "How did you feel when . . ." I'll tell the story from the beginning, and when I'm interested in hearing what *you* have to say, I'll let you know.

Oh, and in case you were wondering? No, I wasn't always such a bitch.

I dozed in bed a little longer than usual that first Sunday morning in August while my golden retriever, Emma, snored in my ear. I didn't get many moments to indulge. I was working my ass off that month going after a waterfront condo development. For Clayton Falls, a hundred-unit complex is a big deal, and it was down to me and another Realtor. I didn't know who my competition was, but the developer had called me on Friday to tell me they were impressed with my presentation and would let me know in a few days. I was so close to the big time I could already taste the champagne. I'd actually only tried the stuff once at a wedding and ended up switching it for a beer—nothing says class like a girl in a satin bridesmaid dress swilling beer out of the bottle—but I was convinced this deal would transform me into a sophisticated businesswoman. Sort of a water-into-wine thing. Or in this case, beer into champagne.

After a week of rain it was finally sunny, and warm enough for me to wear my favorite suit. It was pale yellow and made from the softest material. I loved how it made my eyes look hazel instead of a boring brown. I generally avoid skirts because at only a hiccup over five feet I look like a midget in them, but something about the cut of this one made my legs look longer. I even decided to wear heels. I'd just had my hair

trimmed so it swung against my jawline perfectly, and after a last-minute inspection in my hall mirror for any gray hairs—I was only thirty-two last year, but with black hair those suckers show up fast—I gave myself a whistle, kissed Emma good-bye (some people touch wood, I touch dog), and headed out.

The only thing I had to do that day was host an open house. It would've been nice to have the day off, but the owners were anxious to sell. They were a nice German couple and the wife baked me Bavarian chocolate cake, so I didn't mind spending a few hours to keep them happy.

My boyfriend, Luke, was coming over for dinner after he was done working at his Italian restaurant. He'd had a late shift the night before, so I sent him a can't-wait-to-see-you-later e-mail. Well, first I tried to send him one of those e-mail card things he was always sending me, but all the choices were cutesy—kissing bunnies, kissing frogs, kissing squirrels—so I settled on a simple e-mail. He knew I was more of a show than tell kind of girl, but lately I'd been so focused on the waterfront deal I hadn't shown the poor guy much of anything, and God knows he deserved better. Not that he ever complained, even when I had to cancel at the last minute a couple of times.

My cell phone rang while I was struggling to shove the last open house sign into my trunk without getting dirt on my suit. On the off chance it was the developer, I grabbed the phone out of my purse.

“Are you at home?” *Hi to you too, Mom.*

“I'm just leaving for the open house—”

“So you're still doing that today? Val mentioned she hadn't seen many of your signs lately.”

“You were talking to Aunt Val?” Every couple of months

Mom had a fight with her sister and was “never speaking to her again.”

“First she invites me to lunch like she didn’t just completely insult me last week, but two can play that game, then before we’ve even ordered she just has to tell me your cousin sold a waterfront listing. Can you believe Val’s flying over to Vancouver tomorrow just to go shopping with her for new clothes on Robson Street? *Designer* clothes.” Nice one, Aunt Val. I struggled not to laugh.

“Good for Tamara, but she looks great in anything.” I hadn’t actually seen my cousin in person since she’d moved to the mainland right after high school, but Aunt Val was always e-mailing just-look-what-my-amazing-kids-are-up-to-now photos.

“I told Val you have some nice things too. You’re just . . . conservative.”

“Mom, I have *lots* of nice clothes, but I—”

I stopped myself. She was baiting me, and Mom isn’t the catch-and-release type. Last thing I wanted to do was spend ten minutes debating appropriate business attire with a woman who wears four-inch heels and a dress to get the mail. Sure as hell wasn’t any point. Mom may be small, barely five feet, but I was the one always falling short.

“Before I forget,” I said, “can you drop off my cappuccino maker later?”

She was quiet for a moment, then said, “You want it *today*?”

“That’s why I asked, Mom.”

“Because I *just* invited some of the ladies in the park over for coffee tomorrow. Your timing is perfect, as usual.”

“Oh, crap, sorry, Mom, but Luke’s coming over and I want to make him a cappuccino with breakfast. I thought you were going to buy one, you just wanted to try mine?”

“We were, but your stepdad and I are a little behind right now. I’ll just have to call the girls this afternoon and explain.”

Great, now I felt like a jerk.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll get it next week or something.”

“Thanks, Annie Bear.” Now I was Annie Bear.

“You’re welcome, but I still need it—” She hung up.

I groaned and shoved the phone back in my purse. The woman never let me finish a goddamn sentence if it wasn’t something she wanted to hear.

At the corner gas station, I stopped to grab a coffee and a couple of magazines. My mom loves trashy magazines, but I only buy them to give me something to do if no one comes in to an open house. One of them had a picture of some poor missing woman on the cover. I looked at her smiling face and thought: She used to be just a girl living her life, and now everyone thinks they know all about her.

The open house was a little slow. I guess most people were taking advantage of the good weather—like I should have been. About ten minutes before it ended I started packing up my stuff. When I went outside to put some flyers in my trunk, a newer tan-colored van pulled in and parked right behind my car. An older guy, maybe mid-forties, walked toward me with a smile on his face.

“Shoot, you’re packing up. Serves me right—saving the best for last. Would it be a huge inconvenience if I had a quick look around?”

For a second I considered telling him it was too late. A part of me just wanted to go home, and I still had to get some

stuff from the grocery store, but as I hesitated he put his hands on his hips, stepped back a couple of feet, and surveyed the front of the house.

“Wow!”

I looked him over. His khakis were perfectly pressed, and I liked that. Fluffing my clothes in the dryer is my version of ironing. His running shoes were glaringly white, and he was wearing a baseball hat with the logo of a local golf course on the brim. His lightweight beige coat sported the same logo over his heart. If he belonged to the club, he had money behind him. Open houses usually attract neighbors or people out on Sunday drives, but when I glanced at his van I could see our real estate magazine sitting on the dash. What the hell, a few more minutes wouldn't kill me.

I gave him a big smile and said, “Of course I don't mind, that's what I'm here for. My name's Annie O'Sullivan.”

I held out my hand, and as he came toward me to shake it, he stumbled on the flagstone path. To stop himself from falling to his knees, he braced his hands on the ground, ass up. I reached for him but he jumped to his feet in seconds, laughing and brushing the dirt from his hands.

“Oh, my God—I'm so sorry. Are you okay?”

Large blue eyes set in an open face were bright with amusement. Laugh lines radiated from the corners, leaked into flushed cheeks, and were commas to a wide grin of straight white teeth. It was one of the most genuine smiles I'd seen in a long time, and a face you just had to smile back at.

He bowed theatrically and said, “I certainly know how to make an entrance, don't I? Allow me to introduce myself, I'm David.”

I dropped into a quick curtsy and said, “Nice to make your acquaintance, David.”

We both laughed, and he said, “I really do appreciate this, and I promise I won’t take up too much of your time.”

“Don’t worry about it—look around as long as you want.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m sure you can’t wait to go and enjoy the weather. I’ll make it quick.”

Man, was it ever nice to meet a prospective buyer who treated a Realtor with consideration. Usually they act like they’re doing us a favor.

I took him inside and chatted him up about the house, which was your typical West Coast style with vaulted ceilings, cedar siding, and a killer ocean view. He made such enthusiastic comments as he trailed behind me, it was like I was seeing the house for the first time too, and I found myself eager to point out features.

“The ad said the house is only two years old but it didn’t mention the builder,” he said.

“They’re a local firm, Corbett Construction. It’s still under warranty for a couple more years—which goes with the house, of course.”

“That’s great, you can never be too careful with some of these builders. You just can’t trust people these days.”

“When did you say you wanted to move by?”

“I didn’t, but I’m flexible. When I find what I’m looking for I’ll know.” I glanced back at him and he smiled.

“If you need a mortgage broker, I can give you some names.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be buying with cash.” Better and better. “Does it have a fenced backyard?” he said. “I have a dog.”

“Oh, I love dogs—what kind?”

“A golden retriever, purebred, and he needs a lot of room to move around.”

“I totally understand, I have a golden too, and she’s a handful if she doesn’t get enough exercise.” I opened the sliding

glass door to show him the cedar fencing. “So what’s your dog’s name?”

In the second that I waited for him to answer, I realized he was too close behind me. Something hard pressed into my lower back.

I tried to turn around, but he grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked my head back so fast and so painfully I thought a piece of my scalp would tear off. My heart slammed against my rib cage, and blood roared in my head. I willed my legs to kick out, run—to do something, anything—but I couldn’t make them move.

“Yes, Annie, that’s a gun, so please listen carefully. I’m going to let go of your hair and you’re going to remain calm while we take a walk out to my van. And I want you to keep that pretty smile on your face while we do that, okay?”

“I—I can’t—” *I can’t breathe.*

Voice low and calm against my ear, he said, “Take a deep breath, Annie.”

I sucked in a lungful.

“Let it out nice and easy.”

I exhaled slowly.

“Again.” The room came back into focus.

“Good girl.” He released my hair.

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I could feel the gun grinding into my spine as he used it to push me forward. He urged me out the front door and down the steps, humming a little melody. While we walked to his van, he whispered into my ear.

“Relax, Annie. Just pay attention to what I tell you and we won’t have any problems. Don’t forget to keep smiling.” As we moved farther from the house I looked around—somebody had to be seeing this—but no one was in sight. I’d never

noticed how many trees surrounded the house or that both of the neighboring homes faced away.

“I’m so glad the sun came out for us. It’s a lovely day for a drive, don’t you agree?”

He’s got a gun and he’s talking about *the weather*?

“Annie, I asked you a question.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what, Annie?”

“It’s a nice day for a drive.” Like two neighbors having a conversation over the fence. I kept thinking, this guy can’t be doing this in broad daylight. It’s an open house, for God’s sake, I have a sign at the end of the driveway, and a car is going to pull up any minute.

We were at the van.

“Open the door, Annie.” I didn’t move. He pressed the gun to my lower back. I opened the door.

“Now get in.” The gun pressed harder. I got in and he closed the door.

As he began to walk away, I yanked the door handle and pushed the automatic lock repeatedly, but something was wrong. I rammed my shoulder into the door. *Open, GODDAMMIT!*

He crossed in front of the van.

I pounded the locks, the power window button, tugged at the handle. His door opened and I turned around. In his hand was a keyless entry remote.

He held it up and smiled.

As he backed down the driveway and I watched the house get smaller, I couldn’t believe what was happening. He wasn’t real. None of this was real. At the end of the driveway he paused for a second, checking for traffic. My lawn sign ad-

vertising the open house was missing. I glanced into the back of the van and there it was, along with the two I'd placed at the end of the street.

Then it hit me. This wasn't random. He must have read the ad and checked out the street.

He chose me.

"So, how did the open house go?"

Fine, until he came along.

Could I pull the keys out of the ignition? Or at least press the unlock button on the remote and throw myself out the door before he grabbed me? I slowly reached out with my left hand, keeping it low—

His hand landed on my shoulder, and his fingers curled over my collarbone.

"I'm trying to ask about your day, Annie. You're not usually so rude."

I stared at him.

"The open house?"

"It was . . . it was slow."

"You must have been happy when I came by, then!"

He gave me that smile I'd found so genuine. As he waited for me to respond, his smile began to droop and his grip tightened.

"Yes, yes, it was nice to see someone."

The smile was back. He rubbed me on the shoulder where his hand had been, then cupped my cheek.

"Just try to relax and enjoy the sun, you look so stressed out lately." When he faced the road again, he gripped the steering wheel with one hand and rested the other on my thigh. "You're going to like it there."

"Where? Where are you taking me?"

He began to hum.

After a while he turned down a little side road and parked. I had no idea where we were. He shut off the van, turned to me, and smiled like we were on a date.

“Not much longer now.”

He got out, walked around the front of the van, then opened my door. I hesitated for a second. He cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows. I got out.

He put an arm around my shoulders, the gun in his other hand, and we walked toward the back of the van.

He inhaled deeply. “Mmmm, smell that air. Incredible.”

Everything was so quiet, that hot summer afternoon kind of quiet when you can hear a dragonfly buzzing ten feet from you. We passed a huge huckleberry bush close to the van, its berries almost ripe. I started bawling and shaking so hard I could barely walk. He lowered his hand off my shoulder to grasp the upper part of my arm, holding me up. We were still walking, but I couldn't feel my legs.

He let me go for a moment, tucked the gun into his waistband, and opened up the van's back doors. I turned to run, but he grabbed the back of my hair, spun me around to face him, and pulled me up by my hair until my toes grazed the ground. I tried to kick him in the legs, but he was a good foot taller and easily held me away from him. The pain was excruciating. All I could do was kick at the air and pound my fists on his arm. I screamed as loud as I could.

He slapped his free hand over my mouth and said, “Now, why did you go do something silly like that?”

I clung to the arm that held me in the air and tried to hoist my body up, to take away the pressure from my scalp.

“Let's try this again. I'm going to let you go, and you're going to get inside and lie down on your stomach.”

He lowered his arm slowly until my feet touched the ground. One of my high heels had fallen off when I tried to kick him, so I was off balance and stumbled backward. The van's bumper hit the back of my knees, and I landed on my ass in the van. A gray blanket was spread out on the floor. I sat there and stared out at him, shaking so hard my teeth chattered. The sun was bright behind his head, turning his face dark and outlining him in light.

He pushed me hard on the shoulders, pressed me onto my back, and said, "Roll over."

"Wait—can we just talk for a minute?" He smiled at me like I was a puppy chewing on his shoelaces. "Why are you doing this?" I said. "Do you want money? If we go back and get my purse, I can give you my PIN number for my bank card—there's a few thousand in my account. And my credit cards, they have really high limits." He continued to smile at me.

"If we just talk, I know we can work something out. I can—"

"I don't need your money, Annie." He reached for the gun. "I didn't want to have to use this, but—"

"Stop!" I threw my hands out in front of me. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by it, I just don't know what you want. Is it . . . is it sex? Is that what you want?"

"What did I ask you to do?"

"You . . . asked me to roll over."

He raised an eyebrow.

"That's it? You just want me to roll over? What are you going to do to me if I roll over?"

"I've asked you nicely two times now." His hand caressed the gun.

I rolled over.

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this.” My voice cracked. Damn. I had to stay calm. “Have we met before?”

He was behind me, one hand on the middle of my back, pinning me down.

“I’m sorry if I did something to offend you, David. I really am. Just tell me how I can make it up to you, okay? There has to be some way. . . .”

I shut up and listened. I could hear small sounds behind me, could tell he was doing something back there, preparing for something. I waited for the click of the gun being cocked. My body shook with terror. Was this it for me? My life was going to end with me facedown in the back of a van? I felt a needle stab into the back of my thigh. I flinched and tried to reach back to touch it. Fire crawled up my leg.

Before we wrap this session up, Doc, I think it’s only fair I fill you in on something—if I’m going to climb aboard the no-bullshit train, I should ride it to the end of the line. When I said I was screwed up, I actually meant royally fucked. The I-sleep-in-my-closet-every-night kind of fucked.

It was tricky as hell when I first got home and was staying in my old bedroom at my mom’s, slipped out in the morning so no one knew. Now that I’m back in my old place, some shit is easier since I can control all the variables. But I won’t set foot in a building unless I know where the exits are. It’s a damn good thing you’re on the ground floor. I wouldn’t be sitting here if your office was any higher than I can jump.

Night . . . well, night’s the worst. I can’t have any people around. What if they unlocked a door? What if they left a window open? If I wasn’t already waltzing with crazy, then

running around checking everything while trying not to let anybody see what I'm doing would guarantee me a dance.

When I first got home, I thought if I could just find one person who felt the same as me . . . Dumbass that I am, I looked for a support group. Turns out there's no such thing as SAAMA, no Some Asshole Abducted Me Anonymous, online or off. Anyway, the whole concept of anonymity is bullshit when you've been on magazine covers, front pages, and talk shows. Even if I did track down a group, I'm willing to bet one of its wonderfully sympathetic members would be cashing in on my shit as soon as she walked out the door. Sell my pain to some tabloid and get herself a cruise or a plasma TV.

Not to mention, I hate talking to strangers about this stuff, especially reporters, who get it ass-backward often as not. But you'd be surprised how much some of the magazines and TV shows are willing to pay for an interview. I didn't want the money but they keep offering it, and hell, I need it. It's not like I could keep doing real estate. What good is a Realtor who's scared to be alone with a strange man?

Sometimes I go back to the day I was abducted—replaying my actions up until the open house scene by scene, like a never-ending horror movie where you can't stop the girl from answering the door or walking into the deserted building—and I remember the cover of that magazine in the store. So weird to think that now some other woman is looking at my picture, thinking she knows all about me.

SESSION TWO

On my way here today an ambulance came screaming up behind me—guy had to be doing over a hundred. Just about gave me a heart attack. I hate sirens. If they're not scaring the crap out of me, which isn't exactly hard to do these days—hell, Chihuahuas are probably more stable—they're sending me into family-flashback mode. I'd rather have the heart attack.

And before you start salivating over what possible hidden issue my ambulance hostility could be pointing to, thinking you're going to have me shrink-wrapped in no time, chill. We've just started digging through my crap. Hope you brought a big shovel.

When I was twelve my dad picked up my older sister, Daisy, from the arena where she had skating practice—this was during Mom's French cuisine stage and she was making French onion soup while we waited. Most of my childhood memories are wrapped in the aroma and flavors of whatever coun-

try's food she was into at the time, and my ability to eat certain foods depends on the memory. I can't eat French onion soup, can't even smell the stuff.

As sirens passed by our house that night, I turned the volume up on my show to drown them out. Later, I found out the sirens were for Daisy and my dad.

On their way home Dad stopped at the corner store, and then, as they pulled out into the intersection, a drunk driver ran the red and hit them head-on. Asshole crumpled up our station wagon like a used Kleenex. I spent years wondering if they'd still be alive if I hadn't begged my dad to pick up ice cream for dessert. Only thing that made it possible to move on was thinking their deaths were the worst thing that could ever happen in my life. Wrong.

After the injection into my leg and before I passed out, I remember two things: the scratchy blanket against my face and the faint scent of perfume.

Waking up, I wondered why I didn't feel my dog beside me. Then I opened my eyes and saw a white pillowcase. Mine were yellow.

I sat up so fast I almost blacked out. My head spun and I wanted to throw up. With my eyes wide open and my ears straining to hear every sound, I scanned my surroundings. I was in a log cabin, six hundred square feet or so, and I could see most of it from the bed. He wasn't there. My relief only lasted a few seconds. If he wasn't here, where was he?

I could see part of a kitchen area. In front of me was a woodstove and to its left, a door. I thought it was night but I wasn't sure. The two windows on the right side of the bed had shutters on them or were boarded up. A couple of ceiling

lights were on and another was mounted to the wall by the bed. My first impulse was to run to the kitchen to look for some kind of weapon. But whatever he'd injected me with hadn't worn off. My legs turned to jelly, and I nailed the floor.

I lay there for a few minutes, then crawled, then pulled myself up. Most of the drawers and cupboards—even the fridge—had padlocks on them. Leaning heavily on the counter, I rifled through the one drawer I could open but couldn't find anything more lethal than a tea towel. I took a few deep breaths and tried to come up with some clue as to where I was.

My watch was missing and there were no clocks or windows, so I couldn't even guess at the time of day. I had no idea how far away from home I was, because I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious. My head felt like someone was squeezing it in a vise. I made my way to the farthest corner in between the bed and the wall, put my back into it as far as I could, and stared at the door.

I crouched in the corner of that cabin for what seemed like hours. I felt cold all over and couldn't stop shaking.

Was Luke pulling into my driveway, calling my cell, paging me? What if he thought I was working late again and forgot to cancel, so he just went home? Had they found my car? What if I'd been gone for hours and nobody had even started looking for me? Had anybody even called the cops? And what about my dog? I imagined Emma all alone in my house, hungry, wanting her walk, and whimpering.

The crime shows I've watched on TV cycled through my mind. *CSI*—the one set in Las Vegas—was my favorite. Grissom would've just gone to the house where I was abducted

and by taking close-ups inside and analyzing a speck of dirt outside he'd know exactly what happened and where I was. I wondered if Clayton Falls even had a CSI unit. The only time I ever saw the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on TV was when they rode their horses in a parade or busted another marijuana grow-op.

Every second The Freak—that's what I called him in my mind—left me alone, I imagined more and more brutal deaths. Who would tell my mom when they found my mangled body? What if my body was never found?

I still remember her screams when the phone call came about the accident, and from then on it was rare to see her without a glass of vodka. I only recall a few times when I saw her outright drunk, though. Generally she was just "blurry." She's still beautiful, but she seems, to me anyway, like a once-vibrant painting whose colors have bled into one another.

I replayed what might be the last conversation we'd ever have, an argument about a cappuccino machine. Why didn't I just give her the damn thing? I was so pissed at her, and now I'd do anything to have that moment back.

My legs were cramped from holding one position too long. Time to get up and explore the cabin.

It looked old, like those fire ranger cabins you see up in the mountains, but it had been customized. The Freak had thought of everything. There were no springs in the bed. It was only two soft mattresses made from some kind of foam, lying on a solid wood frame. A large wooden wardrobe stood on the right side of the bed. It had a keyhole, but when I tried to pull on the doors they wouldn't budge. The woodstove

and its rock hearth were behind a padlocked screen. The drawers and all the cupboards were made of some kind of metal, finished to look like wood. I couldn't even kick my way in.

There was no crawl space or attic and the cabin door was steel. I tried to turn the handle, but it was locked from the outside. I felt along its edges for brackets, hinges, anything that could be undone, but there was nothing. I pressed my ear to the ground, but not one sliver of light came through the bottom, and when I ran my fingers along the base I couldn't feel any cool air. There had to be one hell of a weather strip around that thing.

When I rapped on the window shutters they sounded like metal, and I couldn't see any locks or hinges on them. I felt all around the logs for signs of rot, but they were in good shape. Under the windowsill in the bathroom, I felt coolness on my fingers in one spot. I managed to remove a few pieces of insulation, then pressed my eye to the pencil-sized hole. I could see a blur of hazy green and figured it was early evening. I stuffed the insulation back in and made sure there were no remnants anywhere on the floor.

At first the bathroom with its older white tub and toilet seemed standard, but then I realized there was no mirror, and when I tried to lift up the lid on the toilet tank it wouldn't move. A steel rod ran through the fabric hoops of a pink shower curtain with little roses all over it. I gave the rod a good tug, but it was bolted in place. The bathroom had a door on it. No lock.

An island in the middle of the kitchen had two barstools bolted to the floor on either side of it. The appliances were stainless steel—those aren't cheap—and they looked brand-

new. The white of the double enamel sinks and countertops sparkled and the air smelled of bleach.

When I tried one of the burners on what appeared to be a gas or propane stove, all I heard was a clicking sound. He must have disconnected the gas. I wondered if I could get any pieces of the stove apart, but I couldn't lift up the burners, and when I looked inside the oven I discovered the racks had been taken out. The drawer underneath the oven was pad-locked.

There was no way I could protect myself, and no way out. I needed to prepare for the worst, but I didn't even know what the worst might be.

I realized I was shaking again. I took a few deep breaths and tried to focus on the facts. He wasn't there and I was still alive. Somebody had to find me soon. I walked to the sink and put my head under the tap for some water. Before I'd even taken a mouthful I heard a key in the lock—or at least what I thought was the lock. My heart lurched as the door slowly opened.

His baseball cap was off, revealing wavy blond hair and a face devoid of all expression. I studied his features. How had he made me like him? His bottom lip was fuller than the top, giving him a slight pout, but other than that all I saw was vacant blue eyes and a nice-looking face but not the kind of face you'd notice at first glance, let alone remember.

He stood there as his eyes landed on me and his whole face broke into a smile. Now I was looking at a completely different man. And I got it. He was the kind of guy who could choose whether he was noticed or not.

“Good, you’re up! I was beginning to think I’d given you too much.”

With a bounce in his step, he walked toward me. I ran back to the farthest corner of the cabin, by the bed, and, crouching, pressed myself into it. He stopped abruptly.

“Why are you hiding in the corner?”

“Where the hell am I?”

“I realize you probably aren’t feeling a hundred percent, but there’s no swearing here.” He walked to the sink.

“I was looking forward to our first meal together, but you slept past dinnertime, I’m afraid.” He took a huge key chain out of his pocket, unlocked one of the cupboards, and picked up a glass. “Hope you’re not too hungry.” He ran the water for a while, then filled the glass. He shut the tap off and turned to face me, his back against the counter.

“I can’t break the dinnertime rule, but I’m willing to bend things a little today.” He held the glass out. “Your mouth must be so dry.”

Sandpaper was smoother than my throat right now, but I wasn’t taking anything from him. He jiggled the glass. “Can’t beat cold mountain water.”

He waited a couple of seconds, an eyebrow raised in question, then shrugged and turned slightly to dump the water in the sink. He rinsed the glass out, then held it up and rapped his knuckle on it. “Isn’t it amazing how real this plastic looks? Things aren’t always as they seem, are they?”

He carefully dried it and put it back in the cupboard, which he locked. Then, with a sigh, he sat down on one of the barstools at the island and stretched his hands over his head.

“Wow, does it ever feel good to finally relax.” Relax? I’d hate to see what he did for excitement. “How’s your leg? Sore from the needle?”

“Why am I here?”

“Ah. She speaks.” He rested his elbows on the island and steepled his fingers under his chin. “That’s a great question, Annie. To put it simply, you’re a very lucky girl.”

“I don’t consider being abducted and drugged lucky.”

“You don’t think it’s possible that people can sometimes come to realize what they thought was a bad event in their life was actually an extremely good event, if they knew the alternative?”

“Anything would be a better alternative than this.”

“Anything, Annie? Even if the alternative to spending some time with a nice guy like me was getting into an accident when you drove away from the open house—say, with a young mother coming home from the grocery store—and killing a whole family? Or maybe just one of the children, her favorite?” My mind flashed to Mom sobbing Daisy’s name at the funeral. Was this creep from Clayton Falls?

“No answer?”

“That’s not a fair comparison. You don’t know what might have happened to me.”

“See, there’s where you’re wrong. I do. I know exactly what happens to women like you.”

This was good, I should keep him talking. If I could figure out what made him tick, I could figure out how to get away from him.

“Women like me? Did you know someone like me before?”

“Have you had a chance to look around yet?” He glanced around the cabin with a smile. “I think it turned out rather well.”

“If some other girl hurt you, then I’m truly sorry—I am—but it’s not fair to punish me, I’ve never done anything to you.”

“You think this is punishment?” His eyes widened in surprise.

“You can’t abduct someone and take them to . . . wherever. You just can’t do that.”

He smiled. “I hate to point out the obvious, but I just did. Look, how about I solve some of the mystery for you. We’re on a mountain, in a cabin I handpicked for us. I’ve taken care of every detail so you’ll be safe here.” The guy fucking abducted me and he’s telling me I’m *safe*?

“It took a little longer than I wanted—but while I was preparing, I got to know you better. Time well spent, I think.”

“Got to—I’ve never even met you. Is David your real name?”

“Don’t you think David is a nice name?” It was my father’s name, but I wasn’t about to tell him that.

I tried to speak in a calm, pleasant voice. “David’s a great name, but I think you’ve got me confused with some other girl, so how about you just let me go, okay?”

He slowly shook his head. “I’m not the one who’s confused, Annie. In fact, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

He pulled the key chain out of his pocket again, unlocked a cupboard in the kitchen, grabbed a big box labeled “Annie” on the side, and brought it over to the bed. He pulled flyers out of the box, all from houses I’d sold. He even had some of my newspaper ads. He held one up. It was the ad for the open house.

“This one’s my favorite. The address matches up perfectly with the date of the first time I saw you.”

And then he handed me a stack of photos.

There I was, walking Emma in the morning, going into

my office, getting a coffee at the corner store. In one photo my hair was longer—I didn't even have the shirt I was wearing in it anymore. Had he swiped the photo from my house? No way he could have gotten past Emma, he must have stolen it from my office. He took the photos out of my hands, stretched out on the bed propped on one elbow, and spread them out.

“You're very photogenic.”

“How long have you been stalking me?”

“I wouldn't call it *stalking*. Observing, maybe. I certainly haven't deluded myself into thinking you're in love with me, if that's what you're wondering.”

“I'm sure you're a really nice guy, but I already have a boyfriend. I'm sorry if I unintentionally did something that confused you, but I don't feel the same way you do. Maybe we can be friends—”

He smiled kindly at me. “You're making me repeat myself here. I'm not confused. I know women like you don't get romantic feelings for men like me—women like you don't even see me.”

“I see you, I just think you deserve someone who—”

“Someone who what? Is willing to settle? Maybe a tubby librarian? That's the best I can expect, right?”

“That's *not* what I meant. I'm sure you have lots to offer—”

“I'm not the problem. Women like to say they want someone who's always there for them—a lover, a friend, an equal. But once they have it, they'll throw it all away for the first man who treats them like a piece of garbage, and no matter what he does to them, they'll just keep coming back for more.”

“Some women are like that, but lots aren't. My boyfriend is my equal and I love him.”

“Luke?” His eyebrows shot up. “You think *Luke* is your equal?” He gave a small laugh and shook his head. “He would have been disposed of as soon as a real man came along. You were already growing bored.”

“How do you know Luke’s name? And why are you using past tense? Did you do something to him?”

“Luke’s fine. What he’s going through now is nothing compared to what you’d have put him through. You didn’t respect him. Not that I blame you—you could have done so much better.” He laughed. “Oh, wait, you just did.”

“Well, I respect you, because I know you’re a special guy who doesn’t really want to do this, and if you just let me go, we—”

“Please don’t patronize me, Annie.”

“Then what is it you want? You still haven’t told me why I’m here.”

He began to sing, “Tiiiiime is on *my* side,” then hummed the next few bars of the Rolling Stones song.

“You want time? Time with me? Time to talk?” *Time to rape me, time to kill me?*

He just smiled.

When something doesn’t work, you try something else. I got up, left the safety of my corner, and stood next to him.

“Listen, David—or whatever your name is—you have to let me go.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat on the edge, facing me. I leaned over right in his face.

“People are going to be looking for me—lots of people. It would be a hell of a lot better for you if you let me go now.” I pointed my finger at him. “I don’t want to be part of your sick game. This is *crazy*. You have to see—”

His hand shot out and grabbed my face so hard it felt like all my teeth were ground together. Inch by inch, he pulled

me close. I lost my balance and was practically in his lap. The only thing holding me up was his hand on my jaw.

Voice vibrating with rage, he said, “Don’t ever talk to me like that again, understand?” He forced my face up and down, tightening his grip with each down. My jaw felt like it was coming apart.

He let go.

“Look around, do you think something like this was easy to create? Do you think I just snapped my fingers and it all came together?”

Gripping the front of my suit jacket, he pulled me over him and pressed me back on the bed. The veins in his forehead had popped out and his face was flushed. Lying partly on top of me, he gripped my jaw again and squeezed. His eyes stared down at me, glittering. They were going to be the last thing I saw before I died. Everything was turning black—

Then all the anger left his face. He let go and kissed my jawline, where his fingers had been digging in seconds ago.

“Now, why did you go and make me do that? I’m trying here, Annie, I really am, but my patience has limits.” He stroked my hair and smiled.

I lay there in silence.

He left the bed. I heard water running in the bathroom. With my photos spread around me, I stared at the ceiling. My jaw throbbled. Tears trickled out of the corners of my eyes, but I didn’t even wipe them away.

SESSION THREE

I noticed you don't have a bunch of Christmas junk in here, just the cedar wreath on the front door. Good thing, considering they say the holidays have the highest suicide rates and most of your patients are probably already teetering on the edge.

Hell, if anyone can understand why people go off the deep end around this time of year, it's me. Christmas sucked when I was a kid. It was hard seeing all my friends get shit I could only look at in store windows and catalogs. But the year before I was abducted? Now, that was a good year. Blew a fortune on gaudy ornaments and sparkly lights. Of course, I couldn't make up my mind on any one theme, so by the time I was done every room looked like a different float in some weird-ass Christmas parade.

Luke and I went on long winter walks complete with snowball fights, strung popcorn and cranberries to hang on the tree, drank hot chocolate laced with rum, and sang tipsy, off-

key Christmas carols to each other. It was a goddamn made-for-TV movie special.

This year I could give a rat's ass about the holidays. Then again, there doesn't seem to be much of anything I care about. Like when I used your bathroom before our session today and caught sight of myself in the mirror. Before all this crap happened I couldn't walk by a store window without glancing at my reflection. Now when I look in a mirror I see a stranger. That woman's eyes look like dried-out mud and her hair lies limp on her shoulders. I should get a haircut, but even thinking about it wears me out.

Worse, I've become one of *them*—the whiny, depressing people who have no problem telling you exactly how shitty their end of the stick is. All delivered in a tone of voice that makes it clear they not only got the wrong end, you got the one that was supposed to be theirs. Hell, probably the exact tone I'm using right now. I want to say something about how pretty all the stores look lit up or how friendly everyone is this time of year, and they do, and they are, but I just can't seem to stop spewing bitter words.

Sleeping in my closet last night probably didn't help my attitude or the dark circles under my eyes. I started off on my bed—tossed and turned until it looked like a war zone—but I just couldn't feel safe. So I crawled into the closet and curled up on the floor, with Emma just outside the door. Poor dog thinks she's guarding me.

When The Freak came out of the bathroom he shook his finger at me, smiled, and said, "I don't forget the time that easily."

Humming some melody—I couldn't tell you what it was,

but if I ever hear it again I'll puke—he pulled me up from the bed, spun me around, and dipped me over his knee. One minute he's trying to break my jaw, the next he's goddamned Fred Astaire. With a laugh, he pulled me back up and led me to the bathroom.

Tea-light candles flickered on the counter, and the air was filled with the scent of burning wax and flowers. Steam drifted over the bathtub and rose petals floated on the water's surface.

"Time to get undressed."

"I don't want to." It came out in a whisper.

"It's *time*." He stared steadily at me.

I took off my clothes.

He folded them neatly and took them out of the room. My face burned. One arm was across my breasts, one hand over my crotch. He pulled them away and motioned me into the bathtub. When I hesitated, his face flushed and he stepped closer.

I got in the bath.

With that monster key ring he unlocked one of the cabinets and pulled out a razor—a straight-edge razor.

He lifted up my right leg and rested my heel on the edge of the tub, then slowly ran his hand up and down my calf and thigh. It was the first time I noticed his hands. There wasn't a single hair on them, and his fingertips were smooth, like they'd been burned. Terror roared through my body. What kind of person burns off his fingertips?

I couldn't stop staring at the razor, watching it move closer to my leg. I couldn't even cry.

"Your legs are so strong—like a dancer's. My mother was a dancer." He turned toward me but I was focused on the blade. "Annie, I'm talking to—" He sat back on his heels. "You're scared of the razor?"

I nodded.

He held it up so the light could reflect on it. “The new ones just don’t cut as close.” He shrugged and gave me a smile. Then he leaned back in and started shaving my calf. “If you remain open to this experience, you’ll discover a lot about yourself. Knowing someone has life-and-death power over you can be the most erotic experience of your life.” He stared hard at me. “But you already know how freeing death can be, don’t you, Annie?” When I didn’t answer, he looked back and forth between the razor and me.

“I—I don’t know what you mean?”

“Surely you haven’t forgotten all about Daisy?”

I stared at him.

“What were you, again? Twelve, wasn’t it? And she was sixteen? To lose someone you love so young . . .” He shook his head. “Things like that can really change a person.”

“How do you know about Daisy?”

“Your father, now, he died on the way to the hospital, isn’t that right? And Daisy, how did she die again?” He knew. The bastard knew.

I found out *how* at her funeral, when I overheard my aunt explaining to someone why Mom hadn’t wanted her beautiful daughter to have an open casket. For months after that, my sister came to me in dreams, holding her bleeding face in her hands and begging me to help her. For months I woke up screaming.

“Why are you doing this?” I said.

“Shaving your legs? Don’t you find it relaxing?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Talking about Daisy? It’s good to talk about these things, Annie.”

Another this-can’t-be-happening wave rolled over me. I

can't be lying in a warm bath with some freak shaving my legs while he's telling me I need to get my feelings out. In what world does this shit happen?

"Stand up and put your foot on the side of the tub, Annie."

"I'm sorry, we can talk more. *Please* don't make me do that—"

His face went blank. I'd seen that look before.

I stood up and put my foot on the side of the tub.

Shivering in the cool air, I watched rose-scented steam roll off my body. I hate the smell of roses, always have. But The Freak?

He started to hum.

I wanted to push him away. I wanted to knee him in the face. But my eyes were riveted on the razor's shiny blade. He wasn't physically hurting me, just a little with his fingernails when he gripped my butt to hold me in place, but the terror was huge, a massive thing tearing into my chest.

Years ago I went to a doctor, an old guy I'd only been to once before. This time he had to do a Pap smear, and I still remember lying on my back with his head between my legs. He was a weekend pilot, and photos of airplanes were all over his office. As he jammed a cold instrument up me, he said, "Think about planes." And that's what I did while The Freak shaved me. I thought about planes.

When he was done and had rinsed me off, he led me out of the tub and gently towed me off. Then he unlocked the cabinet, took out a big bottle of lotion, and started rubbing it on my body.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

My skin crawled. His hands were everywhere, sliding around, rubbing the lotion in.

"Please stop. *Please*—"

“Now, why would I do that?” he said, and smiled. He took his time at it and didn’t miss a spot.

When he was done he left me standing there on the stupid pink fuzzy bath mat, feeling like a greased-up pig and smelling like fucking roses. I didn’t have to wait long before he came back with a handful of clothes.

He made me put on tiny white lace panties—not a G-string or thong, just regular panties—and a matching strapless bra. In my size. He stood back, gave me the once-over, and clapped his hands together, congratulating himself on a job well done. Then he handed me a dress—a virginal white thing I probably would have liked in a former life. Hell, it was a nice dress, felt expensive. It looked like that famous dress of Marilyn Monroe’s but not so risqué, the good-girl version.

“Spin.”

When I didn’t move, he raised an eyebrow and made a circular motion in the air with his finger.

The dress floated around me as I twirled. He nodded his head in approval, then held his hand up for me to stop.

After he led me out of the bathroom, I saw that he’d cleared away all my pictures and the box was nowhere in sight. Candles were arranged on the floor, the lights were turned down low, and there it was, looking enormous: the bed. Ready and waiting.

I had to find a way to get through to him. Buy some time until somebody found me. Somebody would find me.

“If we waited, just until we know each other a little better,” I said, “it would be more special.”

“Relax, Annie, there’s nothing to be scared of.”

Mr. Rogers telling you it's a beautiful day to kill everyone in the neighborhood.

He turned me around and began to unzip the white dress. I was crying now. Not sobs, just stupid hiccupping whimpers. As he lowered the zipper all the way down my back, he kissed my neck. I shivered. He laughed.

He let my dress fall to the floor. While he undid my bra, I tried to pull away from him, but he held me firm with one arm around my waist. With his other hand he reached around and cupped my breast. Tears wet my face. When one dropped on his hand he turned me around to face him.

He brought his hand to his lips and covered the moist spot with his mouth. He held it there for a second, then gave a smile and said, "Salty."

"Stop. Please, just stop. I'm scared."

He spun me around and sat me down on the side of the bed. He never looked into my eyes once—he just stared at my body. A bead of sweat rolled down his face, dripped off his chin, and landed on my thigh. It burned into my skin, and I wanted desperately to brush it off, but I was scared to move. He knelt on the floor and started to kiss me.

He tasted like sour old coffee.

I squirmed and tried to pull away, but he just ground his lips harder against mine.

He finally left my mouth alone. Grateful, I gulped a lungful of air but it caught in my throat when he stood up and started taking his clothes off.

He wasn't a bulky guy but his muscles were well defined, like a runner's, and his body was completely hairless. His smooth skin gleamed in the candlelight. He stared at me like he was waiting for me to say something, but all I could do was stare back, shaking violently. His dick started to go soft.

He grabbed me around my knees and flipped me back onto the bed. As he forced my legs apart with his knee, he trapped one of my arms between our bodies and gripped the other above my head with his left hand, his elbow digging into my bicep.

I tried to twist away, bucking my hips, but he pinned my thigh down with his shin. His free hand began to tug at my panties.

My mind frantically scrambled over everything I'd ever learned about rapists. Something about power, they needed power, but there were different kinds, some of them needed different things. I couldn't remember. Why couldn't I remember? If I couldn't get him to stop, could I at least get him to wear a condom?

"Stop! I have a—" His chest pushed my fist into my solar plexus. I gasped out, "A disease. A sexual disease. You'll get sick if you—"

He tore my panties off. I started to buck wildly. He smiled.

Almost out of breath, I stopped struggling and gulped at the air. I had to think, had to focus, had to find a way—

His smile began to fade.

Then I got it. The more I reacted, the more he liked it. I forced my body to stop shaking. I stopped crying. I stopped moving. I thought about planes. It didn't take him long to notice.

He pressed down so hard with his elbow I thought my arm would break, but I didn't make a sound. He spread my legs wider and tried to force himself into me but he was soft. I noticed there was a mole on his shoulder with a lone hair sticking out.

He gritted his teeth, clenched his jaw, and grunted out, "Say my name." I didn't. There was no way I was going to call

this freak by my father's name. He could control my body, but I wasn't going to let him control my words.

"Tell me what you feel."

I continued to stare at him.

He turned my face to the side. "Don't look at me."

He tried to force himself inside me again. I thought of that one mole hair. Everything on his body was shaved clean except that one mole. I passed by terror, arrived at hysteria, and started to giggle. He was going to kill me, but I couldn't stop. Giggles became laughter.

His body froze on top of me. I was still looking away, facing the opposite wall. His free hand shot out and clamped over my mouth. He turned my face back so I was looking at him, my lips mashed into my teeth. He ground his hand down harder. I tasted salt.

"Bitch!" he screamed, spraying me with spit. Then his face changed again. All life was gone. He leapt off the bed, blew out all the candles, and stalked into the bathroom. Soon I heard the shower.

I ran to the front door and tried the handle. It was locked. The shower shut off, my heart started to pound again, and I raced back to the bed. With my face turned to the wall, I sucked on my bleeding lip and cried. Tears and blood mingled. The bed sagged as he lay down beside me.

He sighed. "God, I love this place. It's so quiet—I put in extra insulation. You can't even hear the crickets."

"Please take me home. I won't tell anyone. I swear. *Please.*"

"I have the best dreams here."

He snuggled up to my side, folded his leg over mine, and held my hands until he fell asleep. I lay there with this naked freak cuddling me and wished the bed would open up

and swallow me whole. My arm hurt, my face hurt, my heart hurt. I cried myself to sleep.

We still have some time left, but I'm finished. And, yes, I remember we're missing next week's session because of Christmas. Just as well—I need a break from this crap. To tell you about it, I have to go back there. Denial is a whole lot easier. Well, at least I can fool myself into thinking it is . . . for about half a second. Avoiding this shit is like closing a door on a raging river. Little trickles of water start coming through the cracks, and next thing you know, the door blows off. Now that I'm letting some of the water through, will the door come crashing in? If I unleash everything that's inside me, will I go floating down the river with it? Well, for now I think I'm going to go home and have a hot shower. And after that, I'll probably have another one.